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(Post-)Modernist Influences: Pound in Danish Literature

The American poet Ezra Pound has been an important reference in recent discussions of the canon in Danish poetry of the last fifty years. In one of the inaugurating essays of the so-called Kolding School of Criticism, “The Modernism Construction. Out of Modernism – Into Literature” (2000), Anne Borup singled out Pound as the master of an alternative Modernist genealogy to rival if not replace the allegedly outdated narratives with Baudelaire and Eliot as master origins. She emphasizes that Pound’s imagism is a critique of Romanticism and Symbolism, and “quotes” verbatim Eliot’s remarks in his introduction to *Literary Essays* on Pound’s lack of interest in Baudelaire and Mallarmé. A curious misunderstanding raises suspicion as to the level of first-hand knowledge of Pound underlying his canonization. Eliot ascribes to Pound “a discriminating taste among the minor poets of the ‘Symbolist Movement’”, Corbière etc. Borup takes this to be evidence of critical distance whereas it is in fact meant to celebrate Pound’s critical acumen in appreciating what remained inferior to Eliot, the second-rank Symbolist poets.¹ These suggested rearrangements of the Modernist canon are transformed into received ideas as one may gather from *American Catalogue*, a book accompanying a Danish–American poetry festival, *In the Making* (2001). Here Pound’s activities are presented as “a revolt against the verbiage of Late Symbolism”, as well as against “the flowery diction of English Late Romanticism”.²

The Modernism Construction mentioned in Borup’s title was what the Kolding School criticized and hoped to dismantle. Given this name in order to be readily de-constructed, the construction was seen to have promoted a certain group of writers, labelled Sixties, Confrontation, Second-Phase or Rifbjerg-Villy Sørensen Modernism. One purpose of the Kolding project was to promote three writers, Dan Turèll, Peter Laugesen and Klaus Høeck, who were seen to have been excluded from the Modernist canon. They were now hailed as major poets defining a new paradigm, a so-called Formal Breakthrough.³ Pound has been, and

in Laugesen's case still is, a major source of inspiration for these three writers. However, he was also a respected and significant figure among the poets and critics the Kolding School wished to push aside. How did that happen? And how could Pound be used against his admirers?

Now this may not be all that surprising. Pound was always a controversial figure in the context of American literature in the twentieth century. There are many versions of the poet, Imagist-Pound, epic or *Cantos*-Pound, Fascist-Pound, Beat-Pound and many more. He has been seen as the essential Modernist as well as the essential Postmodernist, as a lifelong ally of the old-school Formalist T.S. Eliot and as an avant-garde experimentalist who espoused open form and non-closure, the acknowledged legislator of the American poets of the fifties who rebelled against everything Eliot represented: Charles Olson, Allan Ginsberg, the Beat poets in general. In what follows I wish to take a look at the influence of Pound as it manifests itself in two generations of Danish poets (and critics), the early-sixties Second-Phase Imagist Modernists and the late-sixties Third-Phase, Formal Breakthrough Postmodernists.⁴ Which parts of Pound's legacy have been emphasized and which ones ignored by the two parties? How do they construe the balance between imagist, epic, Fascist and Beat Pound?

As Pound set out to write *The Cantos*, he hoped they would grow into a divine comedy for the twentieth century, presenting clusters of ideogrammatic ideas in action and providing mythologizing portraits of heroic artists (including statesmen) through the ages wherever art managed to rise above stupidity and greed: "in the gloom the gold/gathers the light against it" (*Canto 17*). As an old man, he felt the entire project had failed: "my errors and wrecks lie about me. / And I am not a demigod. / I cannot make it cohere" (*Canto 116*). As we shall see, the difference between the Modern and Postmodern receptions of Pound often hinges on the evaluation of *The Cantos*: Are they a failure and does one feel it necessary to say so?

But first a few words on influence and translation in general. Influences in Danish poetry are often made visible through translation by active major poets, as for example Heine by Aarestrup and Claussen, Byron and Baudelaire by Claussen, Hölderlin and Rilke by Bjørnvig, Stevens by Borum, Lorca by Johansen, Trakl and Lindegren by Malinovski, Ashbery by Borum and Frank. Some are done as preparation (Claussen, Bjørnvig and Frank), some as late homages, after the event so to speak (Borum).

We also have influential translations by lesser or no-poets, thus Eliot by Kai Friis Møller, Ekelöf by Karsten Sand Iversen. Finally, there are cases of influence not manifested in translations, and they are of course

more difficult to ascertain, thus Eliot in Wivel and Harder, Stevens, Williams, Eliot and Ekelöf in Nordbrandt, or Stevens and Ekelöf in Højholt.

You will have noticed that I have left out Pound from these lists. His main translator, Jørgen Sonne, produced Danish versions of his poems in 1959 and 1965 and his *ABC of Reading* in 1960. The 1959 volume of poems also included a translation of *Canto 45* by Ivan Malinovski, which became very influential when it was included as the first poem in his *Glemmebogen* (1963, The Book of Oblivion). For many of the up and coming poets of the early sixties this book proved to be an unforgettable introduction to an international Modernism that transcended the sometimes somewhat provincial horizons of the slightly older poets of the Riffbjerg generation. Turèll and Høeck appear to have had early first hand encounters with Pound, whereas Laugesen, at least till fairly late, is a case of second hand influence. He still names the Pound ephebe Charles Olson as his main inspiration. Laugesen and Turèll reveal the major influx of Pound, Olson, Ginsberg and the Beats. If we add Gertrude Stein, Williams, the New York School and the L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E poets, we have the entire canon of American poets admired by the turn-of-the-millennium Danish writers.

Returning to the 1960 generation, the alleged main protagonist of the Modernism Construction, the critic Torben Brostrøm, in fact edited the 1959 translations, *Masker* (Personae). However, Pound was always overshadowed by Brostrøm's real love, French (and Swedish) surrealism. It must be granted, though, that when dealing with Sonne, he never fails to mention Pound and always includes him in his lists of the major Modernist poets. In *Versets løvemanke* (1960, The Lion's Mane of Verse) Pound is paired with Eliot as poets now being challenged by English poets trying to overcome the "intoxication" of their "romantic Modernism",⁵ a category that would surely have surprised the two arch-anti-Romanticists. Brostrøm chose Pound's most famous Imagist poem, "In a Station of the Metro", when he was asked, in 1996, by high school students to name his favorite poem, and he also mentioned Pound when receiving the Bebop prize in September 2009. Here he attempted to reconcile his critics in the Kolding School by mentioning Turèll and granting that *Canto*-like ragbags as well as condensed images could produce authentic poetry.

Sonne wrote an introduction to his 1959 and an afterword to his 1965 translations of Pound. Here he presents glowing tributes to imagism and the ideogram, propagating concrete images as the properly poetic device and denigrating logical abstractions and sermonizing as unpoetic. He considers *The Cantos* to be "utterly incoherent" and in a

state of “progressive confusion”.⁶ Noting that they do not constitute “a ‘poem’ in the old sense”,⁷ Sonne predicts that they will “never achieve completion much less closure”. Yet he also grants that “few poets have written so many fragments of perfect lines”.⁸ The *Pisan Cantos* are his greatest poems, not least because they strike a more personal note instead of the cold impersonality of the preceding Cantos.⁹ Furthermore, Pound is praised for certain inventions, such as the inclusion of factual documents and anecdotes, which had never before been regarded as suitable material for poetry. Sonne twice makes it clear that he has no share in Pound’s Fascist fascination of Mussolini but also claims that he harbors no doubt about his canonical survival, with only one or two other living American poets. In 1959, that would have been Eliot (and Williams as the possible second).

Although praising Pound on the basis of his perfect fragments, Sonne has little respect for experimental work done in his wake. He writes disparagingly of “factions and fashionable movements”, and “the open work” and “non-linear sequences” of, say, Projective verse and concrete poetry get short thrift. Sonne is only too happy that considerations of space constrain him to produce “an anthology of poems”,¹⁰ for this is what *The Cantos* amount to. He respects only the finished, unified work, and is not interested in processual poetics. His and Brostrøm’s Pound is the self-expressive imagist poet, the master of tightly organized and image-born poems. Arguably the best summary of Imagist-Pound as seen by the sixties critics is provided by Thomas Bredsdorff in volume 6 of the Scandinavian *History of World Literature*, published in the 1990s. The later production, Canto-Pound, is quietly but unmistakably downgraded. It constitutes “a dark chapter”, as the poet preached “his foggy ideas” and “played the game of criminals”. Yet his position as the archetypal generator of Modernism is not at risk, and it is the imagist writer of the Metro poem who receives high praise indeed, as Bredsdorff exalts lifelong belief in the image, and adds: “practically all Modernism is imagism – and indebted to Pound”.¹¹

Pound was ignored and forgotten in the academic criticism of the nineteen seventies and eighties, the age of ideology critique and post-structuralism/deconstruction, which disliked Modernism and Fascism almost equally and was preoccupied with Theory and the rehabilitation of Romanticism. Hans-Jørgen Nielsen, who was also part and parcel of the groups later codified as the Formal Breakthrough, may stand as a representative of these currents. He mentioned Pound as the main inventor of haiku for modern poetry and as a precursor of concrete poetry but the American was not important to him. His various poetic-political commitments drove him to dismiss Pound’s work as

“Old Modernism”, or following Göran Palm’s coinage, as “aristocratic Modernism”.¹² Whichever way you looked at it, poetically or politically, Pound was completely outdated. Nielsen’s narrative of the historical development of poetry followed the law of reduction, not that of expansion.

Sonne concluded his 1959 introduction to Pound thus: “His technique as poet is much too erudite, difficult to follow, dangerous to imitate, and his utter confusion in thought and presentation is incredible”.¹³ As we shall see, the advice implicit in this judgment was not taken to heart by the next generation. Things were much different for the three poets promoted by the Kolding School. Turèll was the youngest, yet the first to submit to the influx of Pound. For Laugesen he seems to gain in importance in recent years.

Høeck’s main dialogue with Pound can be found in his *Transformations* (1974). One of its four sections is named “Last Cantos. Ultra-Stable Poems”. Here Høeck cuts up Pound’s *Canto 17* into six parts and then exposes them to systematic variations, interweaving book titles and bits of early Pound poems, with his own text. One of them voices an expression of universal debt:

Yet we are all endebted to you/ and your singable mathematics/ your
violets and cool lightning.¹⁴

Høeck displays a more ambivalent take on Pound’s politics than the sixties poets who never took a second look but condemned it outright. Høeck writes:

An error is an error. And he who succeeds grandly must fail even more.
Or: nulla sine tragoedia gloria.¹⁵

The Latin implies that Pound could not have achieved his poetic glory without being a tragic figure. This must refer to his allegiance to Fascism for which Høeck wants “no excuses or evasions”.¹⁶ Still he claims that Pound’s status as a major poet, more than his Fascism, prompted his trial for treason and his subsequent thirteen year confinement in a mental institution:

But now you have been sentenced not so much/ because of/ your error
as because of your greatness.¹⁷

A condensed version of the first text in this 1974 collection appeared as “An Ode to Ezra Pound”, thirty-four years down the road, in *Palimpsest – on a Century* (2008).¹⁸

Turning now to Laugesen, he came to Pound by way of his disciples, Charles Olson and the Beat poets although the master does make personal appearances in Laugesen's later work. Thus Pound is the final name in Laugesen's "Canon", a poem in *When Angels Burp Jazz* (1998), listing nineteen of his literary idols from Shakespeare to Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht. Later *The Cantos* are mentioned as one of "the dark classics, the black colosseis", "monuments/ of possible future, already lived through, posited/ present". A poem beginning "Pound in a cage in Pisa" includes these moving reflections on the American poet:

He fully believes that art
is an argument. He is, in short, insane.

What little mother will hum my cantos
to her child in the cradle. Me, a fascist.

There is a place for me in Dante's Hell.
My paradise became but fragments. All is fragments,
all of it.
The lines wander restlessly about my cage. I see them,
hear them speak, all of them. Just come. I listen. I see.¹⁹

Pound is also present in *Grassinan Cantos/Radio Fiesole* (2002), in which Laugesen considers the issue of Fascism, in the prose poem "Ecstasy and Comedy":

The collapse of original emotional and intellectual values. Something I think Pound was aware of and one of the reasons for his aesthetic fascism, if you can call it that, which you cannot, because it is impossible to put anything positive into that concept.

He pursues the matter in "Picture Postcards" (Glansbilleder):

Old maestro Pound, they call you Fascist but it was merely rent that stuck in your throat. You woke up one night, panting and saw how things were. And they still are. It must stop. Your generosity was boundless, you just wanted poetry, beautiful and true and free for everybody right now right here.²⁰

This amounts to a qualified appraisal which honours Pound's utopian aspirations and, like Turèll, doubts the justice of labelling him a Fascist.

For the Odin Theatre, Laugesen co-wrote the libretto of the chamber "opera", *Ezra*, which was first performed in 2005. Laugesen himself is on stage, mostly typewriting in the background (almost but not quite

the poet in the Pisa cage) and reciting his own texts. The opera comes over as the story of a love triangle interspersed with a sung chorus, Pound's late summary of *The Cantos*: "I have tried to write Paradise/ Let the wind move/ that is Paradise". Pound is presented as a politically incorrect poet who desired and worked for utopia but was seduced by totalitarianism. Laugesen sees Pound first and foremost as an artist suffering under and struggling against the submission of art to the logic of the market. Given the recent financial crisis, he may not be alone in seeing some sense in Pound's rampant campaigns against rent.

Turèll, too, concurs with Pound's attack on the supreme value of money. 1971 saw the publication of *Sequence of Manjana – the Endless Song Flickering Through the Pupils of the Skin* (1971). This collection includes his variation on Pound's Usura Canto, from which I shall give you this sample.

With usura/ they keep shit afloat/ the same old crazy shit/ and the
chains of usura/ close tight around everybody.²¹

In his 1975 essay, "Ezra Pound is an Old Man", Turèll grafts his critique of usury on to the sixties youth rebellion to produce a call for purifying language as the essential task in the struggle of sensual joy against the lust for money.²² Turèll presents Pound as a visionary seeking an entirely new world in a poem from the 1971 collection, *Movements, Purposelessly Circling* (1971). It begins: "Everybody has his own lights Everybody his nerve archive / Everybody contains a flood of images". These images are expected or hoped one day to turn the world upside down "in one movement of enormous change".²³ As one of the visionaries who have seen these images, Pound joins a select company of Turèll heroes, poets Blake, Poe, Burroughs and Ginsberg as well as contemporary musicians Cage, Dylan, Jerry Garcia and John & Yoko.

Like Laugesen, Turèll had another take on Pound's politics than the early-sixties Modernists. He writes of a "possibly wrong conception of Pound's fascism and treason" and calls it "the worst and most idiotic misunderstanding Pound has suffered from". Yet he also quotes the poet's old age retraction, in which he admitted that he had fallen prey to "that stupid, suburban prejudice of Antisemitism". Several times Turèll grants that Pound was a madman. But madness, for one whom Laugesen had taught to appreciate Artaud and who had read Laing's pleas for antipsychiatry, is only the healthy way to respond to a sick society. Many artists could be considered mental cases, suffering from, in Turèll's words, "qualitatively specific mental disorders".²⁴

But neither politics nor psychiatry was Turèll's main interest.

More than anything he admired Pound for his craft and his tireless experimenting. When one of his friends once showed him a letter from the goalkeeper of the national soccer team, explaining that there are three roads to success, “Practice, practice and practice”, Turèll recorded the event in *Here comes your 19th Nervous Breakdown* (1973) and added: “and Ezra Pound would have said the same about poetry”.²⁵

Eliot had been the first dangerous influence on Turèll, but Pound soon followed, then replaced him and remained a presence to the end. In 1989 Turèll published a translation of the Confucian *Canto XIII* (which was in fact not much more than a slight variation of Sonnet’s), and in *Tja-a-Cha Cha* (1993) he made a the final salute to “Ol’Ez”, in this poem full of autobiographical resonance:

Old-sick-Man-resting-en-route-bank-
looking-at-the-movements-of-young-
unashamedly-healthy-couples-in-love-and-playing-
teasing-children-running-and-jumping

In Chinese it is probably just
one sign –²⁶

So Turèll knew and frequently employed the compact imagist mode that was so dear to early-sixties Modernism. But it was his espousal of the long poem that broke new ground in Danish poetry. Turèll was crazy about *The Cantos*, and himself produced 60 cantos in the three volumes or so-called *Drafts of Space Cantos* (1972–1974). These consist of a collage of sentences lifted from especially science-fiction cartoons of the Marvel Comic Group Inc., among whose heroes we find Spiderman and Daredevil. These texts are, to use an appropriate expression of the times, “far out” or “spaced out”, reflections of the sixties drugs culture in which Turèll participated with glee – and caution.

He describes Pound’s *Cantos* as “a single cacophony, a single movie, a single montage, a single incoherent relation”. This is meant as praise, not criticism, as it would have been in the writings of an earlier generation. Later Turèll writes of “a fast rambling montage – without a single superfluous word”, and compares Pound’s technique to a repetitious Asian ritual. *The Cantos* had no “petty concern for aesthetic conventions and traditional views of the function of poetry”. They may be chaotic, fragmented, yet they also provide “the most profound and complete description of European (and Oriental) civilization”.²⁷

The Danish Modernists of the early sixties subscribed to the modern project in Habermas’ sense as one of progressive enlightenment. It is characteristic of much Postmodernist thought to be acutely aware of

the losses incurred on the route of modernization. Profoundly troubled by the marginalization of art in an increasingly mercenary age, Turèll and Laugesen, and Høeck to a somewhat lesser degree, are anarchists, difficult to put to party-political use, and as always, difficult to place on the modern left-right scale of politics. They do not retreat to the ivory tower, to recur to the slightly unfair received idea of the Symbolist tradition, but present searching critiques of power, somewhat like Zen Buddhist Beats reacting to the paranoia famously recorded in Burroughs's work.

Pound taught the Modernist poets to go in fear of abstraction and to seek luminous images but he inspired the Postmodern poets to provide a simple record of consciousness as it proceeds and not to fear private material nor the incoherence that might result from such an intent. Laugesen and Turèll learned from Pound that a long poem need not be an organized, teleological, indeed nostalgic narrative in the epic tradition of Homer, Vergil and Dante. It could be just a diary, based on nothing more solid than autobiographical authenticity, thus enacting a willing suspension of *Formwille* in order to include everything, to seek chance strokes of linguistic lightning and not sift the material in order to produce the well wrought urns hallowed by The Modernism Construction. This enabled Turèll and Laugesen to include a lot of material that had been excluded from the main bourgeois tradition of high poetry: cartoons (Donald Duck was famously canonized by Turèll as his favourite guru), Zen Buddhism, free jazz, rock music, drug experiences and hippie dreams of the total liberation of desire, defying any authorities that would keep it in check. This expands the realm of poetry infinitely and makes it possible to engage a wider circle of readers who would be scared off by traditional conventions. However, it might also spell a return of the poetics of genius as a Postmodern license to ignore more traditional demands of poetic craftsmanship and to indulge in potentially obscure private allusions.

Notes

¹ Anne Borup, "Modernismekonstruktionen. Ud af modernismen – ind i litteraturen" (2000), in: Borup, Lassen & Haarder (eds.), *Modernismen til debat*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag & Gyldendal 2005, p. 106.

² Frank, Andersen Nexø & Thurah (eds.), *Amerikansk katalog*, Copenhagen 2001, p. 18 and 24.

³ Anne-Marie Mai, "Det formelle gennembrud. Dansk litteratur i tiden fra 1970 til 2000", in: Mai (ed.), *Danske digtere i det 20. århundrede*, III, Copenhagen 2000, p. 535–596.

- ⁴ In his afterword to the anthology *Eksempler* (1968, Examples) Hans-Jørgen-Nielsen coined the seminal term Third Phase Modernism, a historical term to cover the concrete and systemic experiments carried out in mid- to-late sixties Danish literature.
- ⁵ Torben Brostrøm, *Versets løvemanke*, Second Edition, Copenhagen 1964, p. 144.
- ⁶ Ezra Pound, *Masker*, transl. Jørgen Sonne, Arena 1959, p. 11 and 12.
- ⁷ Ezra Pound, *Digte og Cantos*, transl. Jørgen Sonne, Copenhagen 1968, p. 107
- ⁸ Pound 1959, p. 12.
- ⁹ Pound 1968, p. 100.
- ¹⁰ Pound 1968, p. 113f.
- ¹¹ Hans Hertel (ed.), *Verdens litteraturhistorie*, Copenhagen 1994–1995, VI, p. 234 and 234f.
- ¹² Hans-Jørgen Nielsen, *Nye sprog, nye verdener* (New Languages, New Worlds), Copenhagen 2006, p. 377 and 44.
- ¹³ Pound 1959, p. 12.
- ¹⁴ Klaus Høeck, *Transformations*, Copenhagen 1974, p. 114.
- ¹⁵ Høeck 1974, p. 116.
- ¹⁶ Høeck 1974, p. 124. This is reminiscent of Heidegger's "explanation" of his temporary alliance with National Socialism: "Wer gross denkt, muss gross irren".
- ¹⁷ Høeck 1974, p. 133.
- ¹⁸ Klaus Høeck, *Palimpsest – requiem for et århundrede*, Copenhagen 2008, p. 551.
- ¹⁹ Peter Laugesen, *Når engle bøvser jazz*, Copenhagen 1998, p. 77, 92 and 103.
- ²⁰ Peter Laugesen, *Grassinan Cantos/Radio Fiesole*, Copenhagen 2002, p. 19 and 43.
- ²¹ Dan Turèll, *Udvalgte digte* (Selected Poems), I, Copenhagen 2003, p. 294.
- ²² Dan Turèll, *Ezra Pound/William S. Burroughs/Lou Reed : 3 medie-montager*, Copenhagen 1975, p. 7.
- ²³ Turèll 2003, p. 99.
- ²⁴ Turèll 1975, p. 12, 6, 23 and 16.
- ²⁵ Turèll 2003, p. 316.
- ²⁶ Dan Turèll, *Udvalgte digte II*, Copenhagen 2004, p. 567.
- ²⁷ Turèll 1975, p. 9, 17 and 11.